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Superfund

Herculaneum looks beyond the buyout**By Eric Stern
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Welcome to Austin Heights, Jefferson County's new retirement village on the Mississippi River bluffs. It boasts a par-3 golf course and is only 30 miles south of St. Louis with easy access to Interstate 55.

For now Austin Heights is the musing of landscape architects hired by Doe Run Co. to put a new face on the old and increasingly vacant Herculaneum neighborhood that sits in the shadow of the nation's largest lead smelter. It's the center of the buyout zone, an area where Doe Run is buying up 160 homes near its smelter and moving out the families.

The buyout was part of an agreement with the state in March 2002, triggered by the mounting concern over the elevated levels of lead in the blood of children who lived near the 550-foot smokestack.

The company has spent \$12 million on pollution-control upgrades and is under pressure to stop hauling hazardous lead materials through residential streets. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also has been replacing soil in residents' yards and cleaning insides of homes.

The cleanup effort appears to be working. In the last year, the company has passed federal clean-air standards, and health officials say blood-lead levels in children living near the smelter - while still high - are dropping. In June 2002, the state took down signs along Herculaneum streets warning children not to play outside.

Attention is now turning to what to do once the buyout is complete.

The EPA hired consultants this year to interview residents about their vision for Herculaneum when the cleanup is complete.

"What we're trying to do is help the community look at how the property can be reused," said Kerry Herndon, of the EPA's regional office in Kansas City, Kan.

And Rep. Richard Gephardt, D-St. Louis County, recently announced a \$45,000 federal grant to help Herculaneum with economic development projects because "they'd gone through such a difficult time," said Adella Jones, a spokeswoman for Gephardt.

Overcoming an image

The town could lose perhaps 500 of its 2,800 residents, but that won't make much of a dent in Herculaneum's population in the long run. The city is on the fringe of Jefferson County's growth belt, particularly since the recent completion of the I-55 expansion. In fact, the city is planning to annex a swath of land west of the interstate for a proposed subdivision that could double the town's population and add hundreds of thousands of dollars in tax revenue for schools, fire departments and government services.

Overcoming the perception of a polluted town that has been poked and prodded by health officials, government investigators, class action lawyers and the media - last week it was "60 Minutes II" - won't be as easy.

"I want to see Herculaneum return to the reputation it deserves, that is, a good place to raise children, a safe place to raise children, just a nice, small-town environment that happens to have a lead smelter," said Bill Stotler, a retired teacher who has lived less than a mile from the smelter since the late 1960s.

Stotler sits on a Doe Run-sponsored advisory panel that is brainstorming with consultants on what to do with the buyout area. Herculaneum will celebrate its 200th anniversary in 2008, and the group has discussed plans that incorporate the town's history, such as making the buyout area a quaint, river city with old-fashioned streetlights and signs.

Lead loyalty still remains high in the old company town. The 110-year-old smelter was the early economic engine for the community, producing everything from ammunition to the lead for car batteries.

The suggested name for the retirement village proposal - Austin Heights - comes from Moses Austin, the patriarch of the lead industry.

The \$11 million buyout plan is taking place in stages, with the final deadline for the company to make offers on homes in December 2004.

Doe Run has bought about 24 homes so far, but the company hasn't started tearing down most of them.

Instead, Doe Run is keeping the yards of the modest homes manicured, hoping to repopulate the area, but that won't happen until the Missouri Department of Natural Resources and health and city officials agree it's safe. Barb Shepard, a company spokeswoman, said Doe Roe has fended off requests from people wanting to rent the houses.

Keeping the empty homes maintained instead of razing them "certainly builds confidence" for the town's residents, said sociologist Norman Walzer, director of the Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University.

But the company's optimism is not sitting well with those residents who don't want to see people move back into the shadow of the smelter.

"The thought of them renting out my home makes me sick," said Leslie Warden, a Doe Run critic whose home falls in the buyout zone. "It'll start the cycle all over again."

Grayson Rasnic agreed. He said his 3-year-old son's high blood-lead level has dropped significantly since he moved to De Soto after Doe Run bought his family's home last year.

"I think they should go ahead and level everything in that radius and fence it off," Rasnic said. "Stuff like that just doesn't go away."

Mayor John Chamis said he'd like to see homes - for adults only - go back in the area. "I don't want it to become a ghost town," he said.

But for now, talk of redevelopment is just talk. Plans to revitalize the buyout area, which could be years away, should go to the people for a vote, Chamis said.

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